

# Managing Hispanic (Latino) Workers to Optimize Their Performance

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As a young man I spent 32 months in Mexico among the people there and learned to appreciate their caring, kind and jovial nature. Later, while working as a dairy specialist for Utah State University on a Dairy Improvement Project in Ecuador, my wife, our youngest son and I experienced the kindness, thoughtfulness, and hospitable nature of the Ecuadorian people. A few years ago I had the opportunity to work with a Hispanic Congregation composed of individuals and families from 10 different countries where Spanish is the national language. These experiences and the genuine friendships that developed have given me a special appreciation for the Hispanic people and their cultures.

**The trend in the dairy industry is to increasingly employ more Hispanic workers.** In Utah we estimate that upwards of 75% of the cows are milked by Spanish speaking employees. Understanding Hispanic cultural values, attitudes and beliefs allows the dairy owner or manager to focus on the Hispanic employee as a member of the dairy team and not just someone hired to do a job. In Ecuador, I remember receiving telephone calls from dairy producers asking if we would be able to schedule a consulting visit to their farms. Invariably the request was preceded with questions of how I was doing, how my wife and teenage son were enjoying life in Ecuador, and how the rest of my family was doing in the USA. This made me feel that I was held in high esteem and that they really did care about me and my family.

I have the advantage of being able to understand and speak Spanish. Many dairy owners and managers in the USA do not have a command of the Spanish language, and most often the native Spanish speakers have a hard time understanding what little “Spanglish” is spoken. In an effort to help dairy producers and managers speak some Spanish with a more nearly correct pronunciation, I oversaw the development of the booklet “Simplified Dairyman’s Spanish” with a glossary of dairy farm terms and a phonetic guide to help with Spanish pronunciation. This booklet is still available for \$5.00 from USU by contacting Nancy Daines at 435-797-2157 or ([nancyd@ext.usu.edu](mailto:nancyd@ext.usu.edu)). Hispanic workers, whether they speak some English or none at all, appreciate it when their employer or non-Hispanic supervisor makes a sincere effort to speak to them in Spanish and sincerely asks such questions as: “How are you? How are you getting along with the work?,” or “How is your family doing?” It is especially appreciated if the pronunciation is such that it indeed sounds like Spanish. An example of the correct pronunciation of the English phrase, “How are you?” or in Spanish “Como está?” would be “COE-moe es-TAW” (the stress or accent is on the upper case letters). This is an example from the phonetic guide in the above mentioned booklet.

Hispanic workers who feel valued will not only be more productive and perform well, but they will be more apt to stay working longer on the dairy. When they see you trying to learn Spanish and not taking yourself too seriously, they themselves are more likely to attempt to learn and speak English. **Another way to make Hispanic employees feel like they are part of the dairy team is to inform them of the reasons for doing things the way in which you specify.** Share with them written material in Spanish

that emphasizes what you want them to learn or to understand more fully. A good source of dairy material in Spanish is the “Hoard’s Dairyman in Spanish” or the Dairy Herd Management web site (<http://www.dairyherd.com/>, then go to “DHM articles in Spanish”). Wisconsin University Extension has an excellent web site with educational materials in Spanish at (<http://www.uwex.edu/milkquality/index.htm>) Just click on “Spanish Resources” to find the article in Spanish that you want. You will also find a link to an “Online Spanish/English Dictionary” at this same web site.

My good friend Gregorio Billikopf (a Chilean) with the University of California shared this story with me. “A skinny cat stood for hours waiting for a mouse to come out of his hole. He wasn’t having any success. A fat cat walked by, inquired about the nature of the difficulty, and volunteered to show the skinny cat the ropes. First thing, he had the skinny cat move out of the way where he could not be seen and did likewise himself. Next, he barked, “Woof, woof.” The mouse, thinking that a dog had scared the cat away, and that it was safe, ventured out only to be nabbed and devoured by the fat cat. “You see,” explained the fat cat, “it pays to be bilingual.” In Hispanic cultures it is customary to be greeted with a hand shake or at least an “Hola, Juan” (OH-law, HOE-awn). Knowing the person’s correct first name is important. They also appreciate being recognized when they leave work with an “Adios, Juan” (AH-dee-ose, HOE-awn). A really good rule is to treat Hispanic employees as we would like to be treated if the roles were reversed. In the next Newsletter I’ll go into more of the specifics of the differences between the Hispanic and the Anglo cultures. Appreciating those differences can improve our managerial skills and at the same time provide the motivation for our Hispanic employees to do their very best work. Feel free to contact me a (435-797-2163) or [ronb@ext.usu.edu](mailto:ronb@ext.usu.edu) if you have questions or comments.